

Unshackled

Stories of Transformed Lives

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Chapter Fourteen

Louis Skoda and the Silk Shirt Days

SMART YOUNG "PUNKS" in fifteen-dollar shirts were a dime a dozen on Chicago's West Side in the roaring twenties. But Louis Skoda was one of the smartest.

Louis backed his team of horses into the city alley with dexterity. "Whoa, boy, whoa," he soothed. Jumping down from the wagon, he hurried along the alley. His footsteps tapped back at him in the stillness. He stopped at a door that interrupted the brick blankness of the walls along the alley. He squinted down toward the mouth of the alley, then into the gloom beyond them. He rapped a staccato signal on the door.

A peephole in the door popped open. Light flickered into Louis' eyes. "It's me - Fargo Louis," he whispered. "I got thirty cases for you."

The man inside pinched his lips to the round hole.

"Well, well, you're a good boy, Louis. Nice quick work," he wheezed.

"It's a cinch," Louis hissed. What did the guy mean "boy." "Driving's my daytime business, too. I'm an old hand-"

"Yeah, yeah, o.k." The keyhole gentleman brushed him off. "Bring it to the rear entrance. There's two C notes in it for you this time."

When Louis had shoved the thirty cases in through the back door, the wheezing gentleman crumpled the two bills into his hand. Louis waited until he was in his wagon again before he straightened and smoothed the bills down. Two hundred dollars! He stuffed the bills in his back pocket and whipped up the horses.

"Easy dough," he said to himself as the horses maneuvered the wagon from the alley into the street. "You just got to be smart in this racket and play the game right."

Louis would have told the gentleman at the alley back door or anybody else willing to listen that night that he had been playing the game smart since he was a twelve-year-old boy.

"Of course, it probably came natural to me," he would have said. "My old man being as smart as he is. He's not just the small-time receiving clerk in the warehouse he looks to be on the surface. He's in the big time. Nights he tends bar for some of the biggest politicians in Chicago. And these days being prohibition, that's no small potatoes."

It was "Pop," in fact, who had encouraged Louis to be smart, back when Louis was twelve. Louis remembered the argument Dad and Mama had about his quitting school.

"I say it is not good that Louis should quit school when he is twelve years old," Mama protested to his Dad.

"But he's already quit," Dad said with finality.

"Get him to unquit," Mama answered in her mixed-up Bohemian-English. "Talk to him, Jim. Please talk to him."

"What good will it do, Anna? The boy has made up his mind. He plain doesn't like to go to school. He's not interested."

"Yah, but what can we do?" Mama sighed. "Already at only twelve years my boy is no longer in control of his Mama."

Dad laughed, rough and strong. "I'd say Louis was in control of his Mama. And Mama just lost control of Louis. Talk Chicago, Anna."

Mama twisted her wide apron. "He won't go to church any more either. He won't go to school, he won't go to church. Where will he go, Jim?"

"To work, woman, to work," Father insisted. "He's a smart kid, my son. Got himself a job already, he tells me. Sure he has. Errand boy for a wholesale drug house, four bucks a week. Not bad for a boy of twelve,"

Heading his wagon down toward the loop, Louis cocked his head and looked pleased. Father was right. It hadn't been bad for a boy of twelve. But he'd been too smart to stay an errand boy long. When he was sixteen, he had graduated to the Wells Fargo Express.

A driver at sixteen. Some said he handled his horses better than most of the older men. They let him drive a brand-new Wells Fargo wagon and called him "Fargo Louis" from the start.

So what? you say. He wasn't the type to think that driving an express wagon for a respectable company that paid respectable wages was all there was in life. There was a lot more. Fargo Louis

had learned that early.

Louis was still caressing the two hundred dollars when he strolled into one of the city's cabarets. With his hands in his pockets, he slouched in the doorway, looking the place over. In one corner the band screeched "*Alexander's Ragtime Band*," Smoke swirled up from the tables and booths, but not thick enough to mask the smell of warm liquor. Louis spotted his buddies in the back booth. Mabel, too, her skirts a little too short, and a lot too tight, but having fun.

That was the "icing on the cake," standing in the doorway gloating over the cash he'd earned and was about to spend, wondering what orders he'd hear tonight for the next job, deciding what woman he'd pick up for the evening. A West Side fellow couldn't ask for anything more of life.

Louis slicked his hair back with his hand and strode toward the back booth. "Hey, boys," he said, sliding into the booth. "Hey, Mabel." He put his arm around her, and she relaxed against him, warm and smelling of rum. Then Louis spotted the man across the booth.

"Well, killer," he said, "what's the word with you tonight?"

Killer gulped down his drink. His lower jaw looked as if somebody had smashed it in a fight five years before. "Want to tell you something, Louis," he said in a voice full of gravel.

Mabel was giggling. "Hey, pipe down, Mabel, you're making too much noise. I can't think." Louis tried to push her away.

"Aw, so's your old man," Mabel squealed. Her giggles became a hiccup.

"Maybe I can hear something you're saying now, Killer," Louis called.

"Yeah, well, I'll try again," Killer grated out his words.

"Nick said to tell you to arrive by his place at seven bells and he'd give you your orders for further instructin' by that particular time. That's tomorrow night. Seven bells, a lovely time of the evening."

"O.K., Killer, I got you," Louis replied. "You can count on me. Now go on and beat it. I got to have myself some fun before the night's over," He pulled Mabel to him. "Mabel, come on over, Honey, and sing Louis a song."

That was how the young gang boys lived in the twenties.

And for Fargo Louis, it was the life. So what if Mama fretted about him, was scared because the Valley Gang had tapped him for one of their bright boys? It wasn't as if he had quit his good daytime job or was even slacking on it. Could he help it if he was smart enough to work for two bosses at once? He could balance the Valley Gang and the Fargo Express with skill.

No, there was nothing wrong with Fargo Louis' life on July 9, 1921. As he sauntered down into Chicago's Loop that hot sticky night, he watched his reflection in the store windows. A new suit, a silk tie, and also a silk shirt. He might have been on Michigan Boulevard. Things were going

fine with Louis.

He looked at his watch. No one was going to put the finger on him for being late. But he was twenty minutes this side of the time he was to meet the boys at a South State Street club to start the night's Valley Gang discussion. "And never be too early," he swaggered. "Don't let them think you're too anxious. Hit it right on the nose, that's the best way."

With twenty minutes to kill, he slowed down at the corner of Van Buren and State. A religious meeting was "sounding off" on the corner. Several women, a fat man with a red face, and a knot of Skid Row bums were listening. Louis checked his watch again. Nineteen minutes to go. He might as well hang around for the laughs.

He stopped a few feet away.

The women, the fat man, even the homeless men were singing a happy kind of song Louis hadn't heard before. He shifted from one foot to another. He did like music. He stopped shifting and listened.

The singing stopped, the man began to speak. Louis still listened. The meeting broke up and the speaker moved along Van Buren Street. Louis trailed him and followed him into the Pacific Garden Mission.

He sat down. A young fellow about his own age, who looked as if he might have lived on the West Side, too, was saying, "You may think you're having a good time when you get all done up in a silk shirt, with a roll in your pocket and a flask on your hip. You may think it's big stuff to make a quick C-note delivering a few cases of bootleg liquor. I know I did.

"But that was before I knew there was another really wonderful, real life I could have. Not only in some faraway hereafter, but right here and now, today in the city of Chicago. I found out that belonging to the most powerful gang in the world couldn't give me the power which belonging to GOD can give.

"I'm not preaching at you, fellows. I'm just telling you first-hand what happened to me since I met up personally with the living Son of GOD, JESUS CHRIST."

Louis looked down at his well-pressed new pants and his shoes with their look of good calfskin.

"There's no money in the kind of life he's talking about, that's for sure. Maybe it's a lot duller than the way I'm living now, but I think-I want this-belonging to GOD."

After the sermon, the mission superintendent talked to Louis. "Sin is anything that keeps you away from GOD," he said. "But the blood of JESUS CHRIST does cleanse you from all sin."

"O.K.," Louis agreed. "That's for me."

When Louis walked in the front door of his home that night, early and "cold sober," Mama began to cry. "Louis, what's the matter? You're home so early. Something is wrong." She plucked at her big apron nervously.

"No, Mama, never been so fine in my life. Where is Dad?"

Dad came in from the dining room. "Here, Louis.

What's wrong? Any trouble?"

Louis sat down. "No, look, both of you, sit down. No trouble. Not ever again. I became a Christian tonight. Down at the Pacific Garden Mission. I'm through with the Valley Gang, Dad."

Mama bewildered shook her head. "I no understand. But I'm glad you said good-by to the Valley Gang."

Dad sat on the arm of the chair and slapped his knees and rocked back and forth. "Pacific Garden Mission-Christian-you-hah-hah," he gasped out.

"You heard me right, 'Pop'," Louis said again. "I got all my sins wiped out tonight and from now on, I'm going straight. I'm not too good at saying it yet, but I know it's the most terrific thing that has happened to me."

Let Dad chortle.

Louis went upstairs smiling. He looked in the mirror. Same silk shirt, same flashy tie. But a different fellow wearing them. It was then he remembered for the first time since twenty minutes to seven his three pals sitting in the State Street cabaret, pressing out cigarette butts in a saucer, waiting for him.

Fargo Louis was still Fargo Louis. He had the same job, drove the same team of horses. In the daytime, that is. There was no more night work.

But life wasn't dull. Because on the West Side, Christianity wasn't for softies. Dad taught him that. Even praying had its risks.

"Hey, Dad, come here and look in at Louis. He's on his knees praying," his seventeen-year-old brother Charles whispered out in the hall one night.

Dad snorted. "Oh, yes, would you look at sanctimonious Louis, my eldest son? Say, Charlie, I got an idea."

Ignore them and they'll leave me alone, Louis reasoned and went on praying. But he heard Charlie come swiftly into his room and then felt a jab of pain in his feet, upturned as he knelt. Charlie kicked him hard, twice, three times. Turn around and slap the boy down? No, Louis was a Christian now. The sting again. Then Charlie's voice out in the hall.

"Stubborn, ain't he?" he mocked.

"Stubborn and crazy. Just plain crazy, I'd say," Dad told Charlie.

But a fellow who isn't scared of pulling a load of bootleg hooch down a back alley isn't scared of standing up for what he knows is right. Charlie's kicks didn't tear Louis from his faith. Nor jibes from Dad and brother George. "I can take a lot more than that," Louis said.

And on one of his gospel-spreading jaunts on a Sunday afternoon at Washington (Bughouse) Square, he had to take more.

He knew the square was a breeding-place for derelicts, Communists, and soapbox orators. But it was a good place for the gospel.

"The security you're promised by insurance companies, by your government, by your banks, they're wonderful, but they can be wiped out," he told a group of men assembled there. "But with JESUS CHRIST standing straight and tall in the very center of our lives, we can be hit from all directions and we can not only take it, we can smile about it, we can sing about it."

A tall thin old man elbowed his way out of the group and leered at Louis. "How dare you speak such unmitigated drivel! Don't believe him. He lies," he shouted.

Some bench-habitues sleeping in the small park stirred, stretched and joined the crowd. Everybody started to mutter. The handful of derelicts looked rougher than a cabaret gang.

"Listen, I can prove that Christians do sing when they're being tortured," Louis said.

"Prove it, then," the old man Hung at him. "I will, by the Bible-"

"Go ahead."

Louis fumbled with his Bible, found Acts 16 and read about Paul and Silas. After ordering them to be Hogged, the jailer put them into the inner prison and secured their feet in the stocks. Then about midnight - The old man had lit a match, stuck it on the end of his cane and held it forward until it touched Louis' chin. The flame stung, then it seared. Louis read on: "As Paul and Silas were singing-"

"Well, where is your CHRIST now?" the old man taunted.

"Come on, sing."

"I will sing." Louis held his voice steady with an effort because he was in pain. The flame was as a knife, cutting into his jaw. "My JESUS-I love Thee-I know Thou art mine-" The notes wavered, held.

A low growl rumbled in the old man's throat. The match went out; he pulled back his cane, thumped it on the ground.

"Nothing dull about that," Louis would tell anybody who asked him. "Sure, it was worth it. Maybe you'd call playing it smart.

It was a lot more than that. It was worth being burned and made a fool of in Washington

(Bughouse) Square. Because I didn't flinch that day, I came to speak to a roomful of Communists and two of them accepted JESUS CHRIST.

"Sure, it was smart not to turn on my younger brother that day and slap him down. Dad came to CHRIST before he died and Mother, too. Charlie, my brother, is well educated, a missionary in British East Africa.

"I've been playing it right with JESUS CHRIST since July 9, 1921. I'm still with the express company, a driver for thirty-four years, and the money I earn is all honestly gotten.

"Tell you something. If I hadn't played it smart that day and followed the fat fellow in the Pacific Garden Mission, my other brother, George, might never have heard about JESUS CHRIST, might never have accepted Him as his Saviour; and if he hadn't, the church in Austin, Chicago, Illinois, never would have called George Skoda as its pastor."

~ end of chapter 14 ~
